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If Osama bin Laden is captured any time soon, the nation could have suburban Congressman Mark Kirk to thank.

The dead-or-alive reward on bin Laden's sought-after head will rise to \$50 million from \$25 million by the end of the month, courtesy of a measure Kirk pushed through last December.

The Republican lawmaker from Highland Park recently returned from Pakistan, where bin Laden is believed to be hiding along that country's border with Afghanistan. On a prior visit, Kirk was disappointed to find little evidence the U.S. was publicizing its bin Laden bounty. After all, he reasoned, the same reward program led to the capture of Saddam Hussein's sons.

A newspaper ad campaign recently began to let Pakistanis know there is money to be made in turning over bin Laden. But since many of the people in the area where bin Laden is thought to be hiding are illiterate, a radio campaign soon will start as well. To put it in perspective, Kirk says, three years ago, bin Laden was thought to be within an area containing 100 million people. Today, it is pinpointed to 1 million people.

"A lot is for sale in this part of the world, and I think we can meet the price and visibly assist in finally finding the world's most wanted man," Kirk says.

The bin Laden example characterizes Kirk's work as he starts his third term in Washington. A well-traveled former State Department counsel, he is keeping a hand in international affairs. But Kirk also is tackling issues of suburban concern, from club drugs to Lake Michigan pollution to regional transportation planning to medical malpractice reform. He also sits on the House appropriations panel, putting him in a position to deliver back home.

Ask political types to dish on Kirk, and the response (outside of Democrats who don't like his support of parts of President Bush's agenda) is one of those even-his-weakness-is-a-strength

answers: They argue he's got too much on his plate and should narrow his focus.

Instead of adopting that approach, Kirk added another duty, serving as co-chairman of the Tuesday Group, a coalition of 45 House Republican moderates seeking to help shape the GOP agenda in a caucus dominated by conservatives.

The group's main goal this session is to pass legislation returning the nation's stem cell research guidelines back to the less-restrictive National Institutes of Health standards. If such a measure can even get out of the House, Bush (who put in place more restrictive guidelines in 2001) surely would have to veto it, right?

"Depends on what it's attached to," Kirk says, adding that a growing number of leaders believe Bush's position is untenable as researchers try to cure Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases. "I think a fundamental American value is to be pro-science. It's also arrogant to think that this research only happens in the United States. If we have an overly restrictive policy, it will make sense for everyone simply to do research outside the United States. The moment we have cures available outside the United States, I think Americans will be very disappointed."

As the Illinois GOP seeks to rebuild, Kirk is the type of statewide candidate many think could put up a fight: a social moderate and fiscal conservative. Unless redistricting puts Kirk's seat into play, however, it is unlikely he would roll the dice on a risky statewide run.

So then Kirk, a Naval Reserves intelligence officer, will carry on in D.C., having done what he could to aid the hunt for bin Laden. To those who would dismiss the chance of capture, consider the following anecdote: During a December 2003 radio show on WBBM 780-AM, a fellow reporter asked the guest, a prominent lawmaker, if he thought Saddam Hussein soon would be caught. The lawmaker said he doubted it.

Two days later, the nation awoke to discover that Saddam had indeed been captured. Maybe a little extra money will do the same thing for bin Laden.